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Oregon Trails-Book and Book Collecting: A Personal View

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Oregon Trails — Books & Book Collecting: A Personal View

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“...a library is not merely a depository of learning, but a society for the promotion of knowledge...” — Hubert Howe Bancroft

During the fall of 2012 and after having been retired for more than a year, I had the opportunity to attend a couple of meetings of the **Himes & Duniway Society**, a group of Portland bibliophiles and collectors who stand in congenial and cultured contrast to the characters, portrayed with some accuracy, in *Portlandia*. One meeting took place in the Rare Book Room of the Main Branch (one of the more beautiful public libraries in the country) of the **Multnomah County Library** and another was held in a private home and it was at that meeting that I was asked to share my thoughts on “Books and Book Collecting: A Personal View.”

If ever there was a shooting fish in a barrel topic for a speaker, that was it. But it seems to me that shooting fish in a barrel might be dangerous, especially if there are spectators and the barrel is not bullet proof. And so my topic could likely threaten a listener with terminal boredom even if the audience is a group of like-minded persons, people who like to hear about books, book sellers, book stores, and special collections of books. Digressions bordering on aimless ramblings are seemingly welcomed especially when a common chord is sounded.

What follows is not a transcription of my **Himes & Duniway** remarks but a variation on a theme, a riff on books and all that they represent.

Larry McMurtry, writing about why he auctioned off a third or more of his book stock said that his heirs were literate but not bookish and he wanted to leave them a more manageable store. Serious private book collectors are both literate and bookish and know exactly what **McMurtry** means. And if you haven't read *Books*, written by **McMurtry** about his true passion, book selling, try it and see if you are bookish or merely literate, not that there is anything wrong with being merely literate.

As much as I enjoyed reading as a boy, I relied heavily on libraries for my reading matter, and even if it had occurred to me to collect my favorite authors, **John R. Tunis**, **John R. Cooper**, and **Howard Pease**, I didn't have the where-withal or the know-how to buy the books, and we moved so often that a collection of heavy books would have been a liability, something I learned later on during my own moves from one state to another.

When I got out of the Army and went back to college, I found myself keeping many of the

books that had been required by my professors, especially those that I had bought for English and German literature classes. When I became a graduate student, I began to acquire books that served my classes and beyond as reference books that applied to my studies in general.

But during my senior year, December 1969, **Leslie S. Clarke** hired me to work in **UC Berkeley's** Rare Books and Special Collections Department that merged with the **Bancroft Library** while I was there, first administratively and then physically. I was studying German then and intended to become a high school German teacher, going as far as fulfilling my student teacher duties. But **Mrs. Clarke's** example and her mentoring slowly awakened me to librarianship as a career, one in which my knowledge of German could still be used to good effect.

I learned many things under her tutelage, but it was the satisfaction of seeing the research and aesthetic value of special collections that led me to a change in studies from German and Education to Library Science as it was called at **Berkeley** at that time.

Under **Mrs. Clarke's** guidance, I became responsible for processing fine printing ephemera and other print collections (theater posters and playbills, for example) and for classifying, using her **Library of Congress** expansion, the **Horst Kliemann-Hermann Hesse** collection used extensively by **Professor Joseph Mileck**, (author of *Hermann Hesse and His Critics*, *Hermann Hesse: Life and Art*, and *Hermann Hesse: Biography and Bibliography*) from whom I took his **Hesse** seminar. Working with that collection that included all editions of his work, translations, manuscripts, microfilm, dissertations, art work, and the works of authors that heavily influenced **Hesse**, I saw the direct

relationship between a comprehensive special collection and its research value, its lasting value to scholars and private collectors.

The **Kliemann-Hesse** Collection, begun by **Horst Kliemann** in 1913, is one of the richest **Hesse** collections in the world and is a good example of

what a dedicated collector can do. And as often what happens with a serious collector, **Kliemann** also compiled various bibliographies and catalogues along the way. Finally, he ran out of room and was forced to sell his collection to the **University of California** where it has maintained its comprehensive approach to primary and secondary publications, dissertations,

and any other Hessian it can find. **Kliemann**, by beginning his collection early, was able to acquire publications that might not have been available later on or only at greater expense. Most collectors do not get in on the ground floor as **Kliemann** did, but it is still possible if you find a new author whom you like and think has promise.

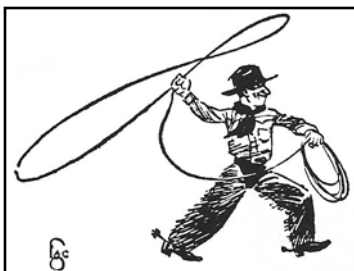
Each private collector learns by experience how to go about acquiring a good personal collection, as comprehensive as possible and focused on a single author or theme. But other collectors, along the way, find themselves expanding the field to include other collections, some of which are logically connected, others more tenuously but still connected. As an example, long ago I became interested in **Christopher Morley** after reading *Parnassus on Wheels* followed by *The Haunted Bookshop*, a sequel of sorts but one that can be read and enjoyed independently of *Parnassus*. While haunting my own bookshops, I occasionally found other books by **Morley** and then expanded from reading copies to first editions.

One of **Morley's** passions was promoting authors, including **William McFee** and *Casuals of the Sea*, a book I have read and re-read regularly and one that I discovered before I had even heard about **Morley**. I began with a quote that I copied into a notebook.

“Be master of yourself. The world is not an oyster to be opened, but a quicksand to be passed. If you have wings you can fly over it, if not you may quite possibly be sucked in.” William McFee, Casuals of the Sea

I don't remember where or when I found my Modern Library edition but I am pretty sure it was in 1962 at **The Intimate Bookshop** in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. For years it was the only thing I owned or had read by **McFee**, but now I own two more copies of *Casuals of the Sea*, an Armed Services edition and a first American edition rebound in a three-quarter leather binding with marbled end papers. I have also acquired six additional **McFee** items including both volumes of *Trader Horn*, by **Alfred Aloysius Horn** and **Ethelfreda Lewis**, Volume Two of which contains a foreword by **William McFee**. These seafaring books sit on shelves next to my *Hornblower* collection that began in an effort to collect copies of all the *Hornblower* books written by **C. S. Forester** but that now includes *The Hornblower Companion* (**C.S. Forester**), *The Life and Times of Horatio Hornblower*, a fictional biography of a fictional character by **C. Northcote Parkinson** (naval historian most famous for *Parkinson's Law*), various books about the British navy of sailing ships, dictionaries of nautical terms, books on seamanship, and the beginning of a collection of **Patrick O'Brian's** *Aubrey* novels and the books

continued on page 77





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Oregon Trails from page 76

that guide the reader through the vocabulary of *Aubrey's* (and *Hornblower's*, too) sailors and the seas they sailed in, *A Sea of Words and Harbors and High Seas*, both by **Dean King**.

Yet another seafaring book that I own is the **Signet Classic** edition of **Richard Henry Dana, Jr.'s** *Two Years Before the Mast*. It fits nicely with my other seafaring books because of its descriptions of a common sailor's life on a sailing ship but it is shelved with my **Wright Morris** collection because the afterword is by **Morris** who writes of the connection between **Dana** and the transcendentalists **Ralph Waldo Emerson** and **Henry David Thoreau**, two other authors that I collect but only in reading editions. And on my seafaring shelves sits a **Dover Press** edition of **Dana's** *A Seaman's Friend: A Treatise on Practical Seamanship*. And so it goes, and so it grows.

One good collection deserves another and the space to live on.

There are not only degrees of connections between and among books and authors, there are intellectual themes and expositions that complement and supplement one another. Any librarian building a special collection or even a general collection must have the collector's instincts and know what a scholar or student curious about one thing or another will need when pursuing a line of thought that is not obvious to the casual eye.

Special collections have an inherent value in their intellectual content and research value. There is aesthetic value, too, in the make-up of the book — paper, typography, binding, illustrations, and design. When these things are brought together in the codex, that perfect technology that defies time, it is no wonder that collectors spend fortunes, large and small, on gathering them together and treasuring them for all of the things itemized above. There are some books so wonderfully designed and presented that once you hold them in your hands, you can't help but read them. They have a feel about them that causes a feeling about them that is more emotion than rational thought.

Collectors know the importance of desiderata lists. Know what you have and know what you need and then familiarize yourself with antiquarian catalogs, second-hand booksellers and their shops, reference works relating to your interest, bibliographies, check lists, and, in these digital times, the Internet, remembering that one bookseller's fine may be another's suitable reading copy. Browsing in a bookshop, antique store, or local charity bazaar allows you the luxury of examining the desired item before buying it. Another advantage of browsing is that you just might find something that you weren't even looking for.

There are many books available about book collecting but, as with **Horst Kliemann**, collecting should be a passion about something that you like and enjoy. Each book on my shelves has a particular value to me. Some have ephemeral interest, books that I will sell or

pass on to others when I have finished reading them. Some have sentimental value, and I wish they didn't because they take up valuable shelf space. But I know from painful experience that I felt such a loss at some discarded volumes that I have, more than once, found another copy and have promised it a permanent home and tender loving care.

Finally, one can spend hundreds of thousands of dollars when collecting truly rare books, but one can build large and satisfying collections on a beer budget. There are many online ways to find and buy items for one's collection (author and subject bibliographies, if available, are invaluable), and I use them regularly, but none of them can match the satisfaction of roaming the stacks of a second-hand bookseller, picking out an attractive (an elusive quality that a book hunter recognizes) volume, carefully removing it (don't pull it off the shelf by its headband, please) from the shelf, blowing the dust off of the top edge, and opening it to the title page to discover a title that you must buy even though you didn't know you were looking for it, didn't even know the book or author existed. When you reach that state, you have the bug — you are a collector.

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How busy you are in your library, your paradise.

— **Morley's Knot Hole** (**Christopher Morley** Park, Long Island) 